

a sick planet

GUY DEBORD

TRANSLATED BY DONALD NICHOLSON-SMITH

a sick planet

a sick planet GUY DEBORD

TRANSLATED BY DONALD NICHOLSON-SMITH



LONDON NEW YORK CALCUTTA



AMBASSADE DE FRANCE EN INDE
FRENCH EMBASSY IN INDIA

Published with the support of
the Embassy of France in India

Seagull Books

Editorial offices:

1st Floor, Angel Court, 81 St Clements Street
Oxford OX4 1AW, UK

1 Washington Square Village, Apt 1U
New York, NY 10012, USA

26 Circus Avenue, Calcutta 700 017, India

Guy Debord, *La Planète Malade*

© Alice Debord and Editions Gallimard, Paris, 2004

English translation © Donald Nicholson Smith 2007

First published in English by Seagull Books, 2008

ISBN 10 1 9054 2 268 5

ISBN-13 978 1 9054 2 268 5

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library

Typeset by Seagull Books, Calcutta, India

Printed at Rockwel Offset, Calcutta

CONTENTS

A Note (Alice Debord)	<i>vii</i>
The Decline and Fall of the 'Spectacular' Commodity-Economy	1
The Explosion Point of Ideology in China	35
A Sick Planet	75

A Note

Of the three independent texts by Guy Debord included here, two were first published as pamphlets, while the third was written in 1971 for inclusion in a projected thirteenth issue of the Situationist International's journal which never appeared because of the group's dissolution.

Despite the seeming diversity of the subjects discussed—the Watts riots in ‘The Decline and Fall of the “Spectacular” Commodity-Economy’ (1965); the disintegration of bureaucratic power in ‘The Explosion Point of Ideology in China’ (1967); pollution and its representation in ‘A Sick Planet’ (1971)—all three texts deal with the varied forms of the ‘spectacle’ and its repercussions. And despite the dates of their composition, all three remain startlingly relevant today.

Alice Debord (2004)

The Decline and Fall of the 'Spectacular' Commodity-Economy

This article was first published by the Situationist International in English translation as a pamphlet, without the illustrations (Paris, December 1965). A modified version of the translation was included in Ken Knabb, ed. and trans., *Situationist International Anthology* (Berkeley, CA: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981). The translator of the present volume has taken this opportunity to revise his English version of 1965.

Guy Debord's original French text, 'Le Déclin et la chute de l'économie spectaculaire-marchande', first appeared under the collective signature of the Situationists in *Internationale Situationniste* 10 (Paris, March 1966). The work was republished in 1993, signed by Debord alone, as a small volume (Paris: Jean-Jacques Pauvert aux Belles Lettres); the entire remaining stock of this edition was destroyed in a warehouse fire on 29 May 2002. The French text may also be found in Guy Debord, *Oeuvres* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006, pp. 702–14).

FROM THE THIRTEENTH TO THE SIXTEENTH of August 1965, the blacks of Los Angeles rose up. An incident involving traffic police and pedestrians developed into two days of spontaneous rioting. The agents of law enforcement, though beefed up repeatedly, were unable to regain control of the streets. By the third day, the blacks had armed themselves by looting such gun shops as were accessible, and were able to open fire on police helicopters. Thousands of soldiers and police—including the military weight of an entire infantry division, supported by tanks—had to be thrown into the conflict so as to confine the rebellion to the Watts area, after which it took several days and much fighting in the streets before things could be brought under control. The rioters did not hesitate to plunder neighbourhood shops and then set them on fire. Official figures report 32 dead, including 27 blacks, more than 800 wounded and some 3,000 locked up.

Reactions across the board were characterized by the lucidity that revolutionary events—being themselves clarifications in acts of existing problems—are always uniquely able to confer on the varied utterances of their opponents. Thus Chief of Police William Parker refused all offers of mediation from the main black organizations, stating, quite correctly, that the rioters had no leaders. Indeed, inasmuch as the blacks no longer had leaders, this was the moment of truth for both parties. What did Roy Wilkins, general secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), want at that moment? He declared that the riots should be put down with all necessary force. And Cardinal McIntyre of Los Angeles, though he protested loudly, did not protest against the violence of the repression—the intelligent thing to do, one might have thought, during the Catholic Church's current period of *aggiornamento*; instead, he protested in the

most urgent tones about a premeditated revolt against the rights of one's neighbour, against respect for law and order, and called upon Catholics to oppose the looting and the violence which had 'no apparent justification'. Even those prepared to acknowledge *apparent* justifications for the black anger in Los Angeles (though not, of course, any *real* ones)—all the theorists and 'spokesmen' of the international Left (or, rather, of its nothingness)—deplored the irresponsibility and disorder; the looting—especially the fact that *liquor and weapons* were the first targets for plunder; and, above all, the estimated 2,000 fires started by the Watts petrol-throwers to light up their battle and their celebration. But who has defended the rioters of Los Angeles in the terms they deserve? Well, we shall. Let us leave the economists to grieve over the 27 million dollars lost and the town-planners over one of their most beautiful supermarkets gone up in smoke, and McIntyre over his slain

deputy sheriff; let the sociologists weep over the absurdity and the euphoria of this rebellion. The task of a revolutionary journal is not only to endorse the Los Angeles insurgents, but also to help supply them with their reasons: to offer a theoretical account of the truth sought implicitly by their practical action.

In the *Address to Revolutionaries of Algeria and of All Countries* which they published in Algiers in July 1965, following Boumedienne's *coup d'état*, the Situationists described conditions in Algeria and in the rest of the world *as a whole*; among their examples, they evoked the black movement in America which, if it could 'assert itself in a cogent way', would unmask the contradictions of capitalism in its most advanced form. Five weeks later, just such a cogency erupted into the streets. Theoretical criticism of the most novel aspects of modern society and criticism in *acts* of that same society coexist at present: still separated but both

confronting the same reality, both 'talking' of the same thing. These two critiques are mutually explanatory, each being incomprehensible without the other. Our theory of survival and of the spectacle is illuminated and verified by these actions, as unintelligible as they may be to America's false consciousness. One day these actions will in turn be illuminated by this theory.

Hitherto, civil rights demonstrations had been kept by the black leadership within the limits of a legal system which tolerated the most appalling violence on the part of the police and the racists, as for instance in Alabama the previous March, during the Montgomery march; and, as if this outrage was not sufficient, a discreet agreement between the Federal government, Governor Wallace and Pastor King had led the Selma marchers on 10 March to fall back at the first request, in dignity and prayer. The confrontation anticipated by the crowd of protestors was turned

into a mere spectacle—into a strictly notional event. Non-violence thus reached the pitiful limit of its courage: first expose yourself to the enemy's blows, then demonstrate your moral superiority by sparing that enemy the trouble of any further resort to force. The basic fact is that the civil rights movement, by remaining within the law, raises only legal issues. It is logical to make an appeal to the law by legal means. What is not logical is to use legal pleadings to confront raw injustice—as though it were a nonsense that would disappear as soon as it was pointed out. Clearly, the surface-level, outrageously blatant injustice that still affects blacks in many American states has its roots in a socio-economic contradiction that is beyond the remit of existing laws, and that no future *legislation* will be able to get rid of in face of the deeper, cultural laws of a society where black people are at last daring to demand the right to live. The truth is that American blacks want the total

subversion of that society—or nothing. The question of the necessity for such subversion arises of its own accord the moment blacks start using subversive means: the resort to such methods happens on the level of daily life, appearing at one and the same time as the most accidental and the most objectively justified development. This issue is broader than the condition of American blacks: it is the condition of America itself, even if blacks are the first to have raised it. For Watts was not a *racial* conflict: the rioters left whites who were in their path alone, attacking only the white policemen; similarly, black solidarity did not extend to black shopkeepers, nor even to black drivers. Even Martin Luther King, in Paris in October [1965], had to acknowledge that things had overshoot the bounds of his specialization: 'These were not race riots,' he said. 'They were class riots.'

The Los Angeles revolt was a revolt against the commodity, against a world of commodities



Critique of City Planning:
Supermarket, Los Angeles, August 1965

America has wasted no time investigating this new scourge. For several months now, sociologists, politicians, psychologists, economists and experts of every stripe have been trying to trace its roots. . . . This is not a 'neighbourhood' in the ordinary sense of the word; rather, it is a soul-destroyingly vast, monotonous plain. . . . A 'single-storey America', all on one level; the bleakest of American landscapes, with its flat-roofed houses, its stores all selling the same thing, its hamburger stands, its service stations, and everything blighted by poverty and strewn with rubbish . . . Motor traffic is less dense than elsewhere, but pedestrians are hardly more numerous for all that; dwellings seem few and far between, and the distances demoralize. . . . White passers-by attract stares which if not hateful are at least sardonic ('Just more research people' is a widely heard refrain. 'More sociologists. They come with lots of

questions, but they don't bring us any jobs.') As for housing conditions, they could certainly be improved physically, but it is hard to see how it would be possible to stop white people leaving en masse as soon as blacks start moving in. The blacks themselves are bound to continue feeling that they have been left to their own devices, especially in the vast expanses of a city like Los Angeles, with no real centre, without so much as a crowd into which to blend, where whites glimpse their fellow citizens only through their car windscreens. . . . Speaking in Watts a few days after the riots, Martin Luther King called on his race brothers and sisters to 'link arms'—in response to which someone in the crowd shouted 'and burn it down!' It is a reassuring sight to come upon so-called middle-class neighbourhoods, not far from Watts, where members of the new black middle class mow their lawns in front of luxurious residences.

Michel Tatu, *Le Monde*, 3 November 1965

and of worker-consumers *hierarchically* subordinated to the measuring-rod of the commodity. The blacks of Los Angeles—like groups of young delinquents in all advanced countries, but in a more radical way inasmuch as they belong to a class globally deprived of a future, a sector of the proletariat unable to see any significant prospect of advancement or integration—take modern capitalist propaganda, with its touting of affluence, *at its word*. They want all the objects displayed, and available in the abstract, *right now*—because they want to *use* them. In this they are rejecting their exchange-value, that *commodity-reality* which is their mould, motor and *raison d'être* and which has *preselected them all*.

Through theft and gift they retrieve a use which instantly gives the lie to the oppressive rationality of commodities, showing their relations and even their manufacture to be arbitrary and unnecessary. The plunder in Watts certainly em-

bodied, in the simplest possible form, the perverse principle of 'to each according to his false needs'—the needs defined and produced by the very economic system that the act of looting contested. Yet inasmuch as the idea of abundance was taken literally and embraced *in the immediate* instead of being pursued indefinitely in the rat-race of alienated labour and increasing, ever-deferred social needs, real desires also found expression in the shape of festivity, playful affirmation and the *potlatch* of destruction. To destroy commodities is to demonstrate one's human superiority to commodities: to free oneself from the arbitrary forms that cloak the image of real needs. The flames of Watts consumed consumption. The theft of large refrigerators by people with no electricity, or with their power cut off, is the best possible metaphor for the lie of affluence transformed into a truth *in play*. Once it is no longer bought, the commodity lies open to criticism and modification in all its



Playing with rifled cash register

particular manifestations. Only so long as it is paid for with money, as a status symbol of survival, can it be worshipped fetishistically.

Looting is the *natural* response to the affluent society: the affluence, however, is by no means natural or human—it is simply an abundance of commodities. Looting, moreover, which instantly destroys commodities as such, discloses their *ultima ratio*, namely the army, the police and the other specialized detachments which have the monopoly of armed force within the state. What is a policeman? He is the active servant of commodities, a man utterly subject to the commodity, whose job is to ensure that a given product of human labour remains a commodity with the magical property of having to be paid for instead of becoming a mere fridge or rifle—a mute, passive, insensible thing, captive to the first comer to make use of it. By rejecting the indignity of being answerable to the police, the blacks in Watts implicitly rejected the indignity of depending on

commodities. The youth of Watts, having no future in market terms, grasped another *quality* of the present, and the truth of that present was so irresistible that it engaged the whole population—women, children, even sociologists who happened to find themselves on the scene. A young black sociologist of the district, Bobbi Hollon, had this to say to the *New York Herald Tribune* in October: ‘Before, people were ashamed to say they came from Watts. They’d mumble it. Now, they say it with pride. Boys who always went around with their shirts open to the waist, and who’d have cut you into strips in half a second, used to apply here every morning. They organized the food distribution. Of course it’s no good pretending the food wasn’t looted. . . . All that Christian blah has been used too long against blacks. These people could rob for ten years and they wouldn’t get back half the money that has been stolen from them all these years. . . . Myself, I’m just a little black girl.’ Spattered by blood during the rioting, Bobbi

Hollon has sworn never to clean the stains from her shoes. 'Now,' she added, 'all the world looks to Watts.' [Quoted material retranslated from French.—*Trans.*]

How do men make history, starting from conditions designed to persuade them not to take a hand in it? Los Angeles blacks are better paid than any others in the United States, but it is also here that they are furthest behind that high point of affluence which is California. Hollywood, capital of the worldwide spectacle, is in their immediate vicinity. They are promised that, with patience, they will join in America's prosperity, but they realize that this prosperity is not a static sphere but, rather, a ladder without end. The higher they climb, the further they get from the top, because they don't have a fair start, because they are less skilled and thus more numerous among the unemployed and, finally, because the hierarchy which crushes them is not one based simply on buying power as a pure economic fact:

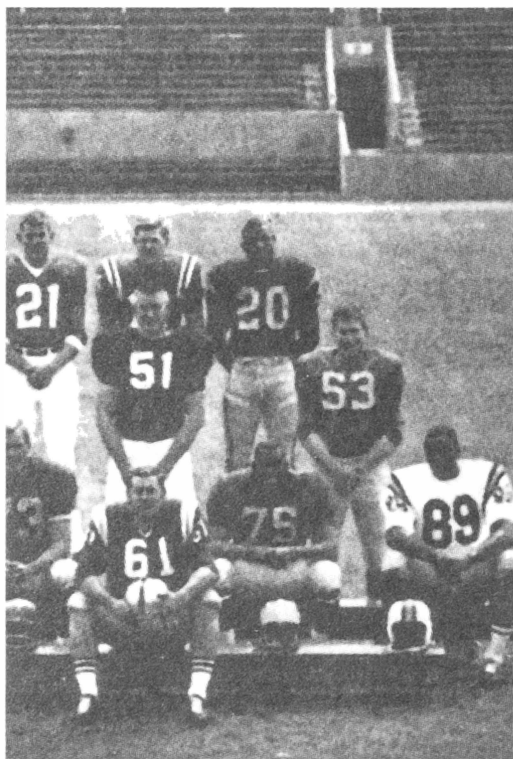
an essential inferiority is imposed on them in every area of daily life by the customs and prejudices of a society in which all human power is based on buying power. So long as the human riches of American blacks are despised and treated as criminal, monetary riches will never make them acceptable to the alienated society of America: individual wealth may make one black man rich, but blacks as a whole *must represent poverty* in a society of hierarchically distributed wealth. Every witness noted this cry which proclaims the fundamental meaning of the rising: 'This is the Black Revolution, and we want the world to know it!' *Freedom now!* is the password of all historical revolutions but here, for the first time, it is not poverty but material abundance that must be controlled according to new laws. The control of abundance is not just changing the way it is shared out, but *redefining its every orientation*, superficial and profound alike. This is the first

skirmish of an enormous struggle, infinite in its implications.

Blacks are not isolated in their struggle, because a *new proletarian consciousness*—the consciousness of not being the master of one's activity, of one's life, in the slightest degree—is taking form in America among other strata who likewise refuse modern capitalism and, in that sense, resemble blacks. Indeed, the first phase of the black struggle has given the signal to a movement of opposition which is spreading. In December 1964, the students of Berkeley, hobbled by the institution in their attempts to participate in the civil rights movement, eventually went on strike against California's 'multiversity' itself and, by extension, against the social system of the United States in which they are allotted such a passive role. Immediately, orgies of drinking and drug-taking and dissolute sex were said to be rife among the students—just the kind of behaviour

for which blacks have ever been castigated. This generation of students has since invented a new form of struggle against the dominant spectacle: the 'teach-in'—a form adopted at Edinburgh University on 20 October apropos of the crisis in Rhodesia. This clearly imperfect and primitive stage in the development of opposition involves discussing problems without any of the time limits prescribed by academic convention; by their nature such meetings seek to carry issues to their logical conclusion, which is practical action. Also in October, thousands of demonstrators appeared in the streets of Berkeley and New York, their cries echoing those of the Watts rioters: 'Get out of our neighbourhood and out of Vietnam!' White people, increasingly radicalized, have begun to flout the law: 'courses' are given on how to hoodwink army recruiters (*Le Monde*, 19 October 1965); draft cards are burnt and the act televised. In the affluent society, disgust for affluence—and

for its price—is finding an outlet. The spectacle is being marred by an advanced social sector whose autonomous action negates spectacular values. The traditional proletariat in the United States, precisely because it has been provisionally integrated into the capitalist system, has failed to integrate black workers. Several Los Angeles unions refused to accept blacks until 1959. Now, blacks are the rallying point for *all* who refuse the logic of integration into that system—integration into capitalism being, of course, the *ne plus ultra* of the integration on offer. Comfort can never be comfortable enough for those who seek what is not on the market—or, rather, what the market shuts out. The level reached by the technology of the most privileged becomes an insult—and one more easily denounced than the most basic insult, which is reification. The Los Angeles rebellion is the first in history to justify itself on the grounds that there was no air conditioning during a heatwave.



Integration—into what?

American blacks have their own spectacle, complete with its press, magazines and coloured film stars and, if blacks realize this, if they spew out this spectacle as phoney, as an expression of their humiliation, it is because they see it to be a *minority* phenomenon—nothing but an appendage of the spectacle in general. Since they perceive that this parade of their consumption-to-be-desired is merely a colony of the wider system, they see through the lie of the overall economic-cultural spectacle more quickly. By wanting to participate really and immediately in affluence—and this is an official value of every American—they demand the egalitarian *realization* of the American spectacle of everyday life: they demand that the half-heavenly, half-earthly values of this spectacle be put to the test. But it is of the essence of the spectacle that it cannot be made real either immediately or equally—and this *not even for whites*. (In fact, the function of blacks in the spectacle is to serve as the perfect prod: in the race for

wealth, such underprivilege is an incitement to ambition). In taking the capitalist spectacle at its face value, blacks are already rejecting the spectacle itself. The spectacle is a drug for slaves. It is not supposed to be taken literally, but followed at just a few paces; if it were not for this tiny distance, it would become total mystification. The fact is that in the United States today whites are enslaved to commodities while blacks negate them. Blacks ask for *more than whites*—that is the core of an insoluble problem, or rather a problem soluble only through the dissolution of the white social system. This is why those whites who want to escape their own servitude must needs rally to the black cause, not in a solidarity based on colour, obviously, but in a global rejection of commodities and, in the last analysis, of the state. The economic and psychological gulf between blacks and whites is precisely what allows blacks to see what the white consumer is, and their justified contempt for

whites in this respect becomes contempt for any passive consumer. Whites who cast off their role have no chance unless they link their struggle more and more to the black struggle, discovering its real and consistent reasons for themselves and supporting it to the hilt. If such an alliance were to be broken in response to a radicalization of the conflict, the upshot would be the development of a black nationalism and a confrontation between the two splinters exactly on the model of the prevailing system. Tit-for-tat slaughter is the other possible outcome of the present situation, once resignation becomes unbearable.

Attempts to build a separatist or pro-African black nationalism are dreams offering no answer to the reality of oppression. American blacks have no native country: they are at once *in their own country* and *alienated*. So is the rest of the population, but blacks differ insofar as they are aware of it. In this sense they are not the most backward

sector of their society but the most advanced. They are negation at work—‘the bad side that produces the movement which makes history by setting up a struggle’ (Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, 1847). Africa has nothing to do with it.

American blacks are as much a product of modern industry as electronics, advertising or the cyclotron. They carry its contradictions within them. They are people that the spectacular paradise must integrate and repulse simultaneously, with the result that in their particular case the antagonism between the spectacle and the real activity of human beings is patent. The spectacle is *universal*, as is the commodity. But since the world of commodities is founded on an opposition between classes, commodities are themselves hierarchical. The necessity for commodities—and, hence, for the spectacle that structures the commodity world—to be at once universal and hierarchical leads to a universal imposition of hierarchy.

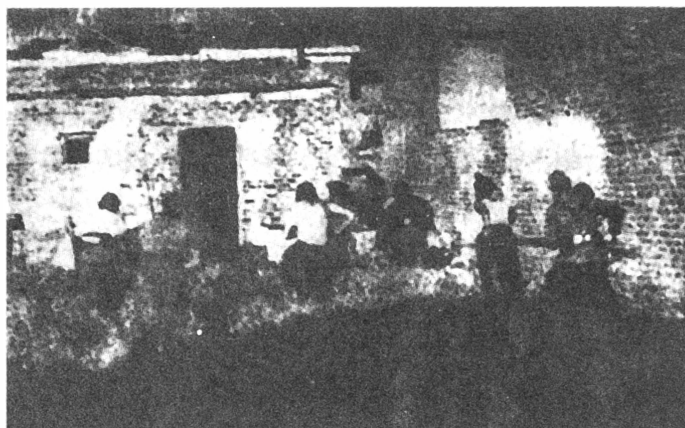
But inasmuch as this reality must not be acknowledged, it expresses itself as hierarchical attributions of value that are unacknowledgeable, *irrational*, in a world rationalized without recourse to reason. It is this hierarchizing process which creates *racisms* everywhere: the English Labour government has just restricted coloured immigration, while the industrially advanced countries of Europe are once again becoming racist as they import their sub-proletariat from the Mediterranean area in order to exploit the colonized within the borders of the colonial power. Similarly, Russia remains anti-Semitic because it is still a hierarchical society where labour must be sold as a commodity. In tandem with commodities, hierarchy is forever reconstituting itself in new forms, forever proliferating. This may be observed as readily in the relations between a trade-unionist and a worker as between the respective owners of two cars with bogus distinguishing features. This is the fatal flaw

of commodity rationality, the sickness of bourgeois reason—hereditary in the case of the bureaucracy. But the repulsive gratuitousness of some hierarchies, and the fact that the entire might of the commodity world is blindly and automatically mobilized in their defence, means that no sooner is some negating practice initiated than the absurdity of *all* hierarchy becomes apparent.

The rational world born of the industrial revolution has rationally liberated individuals from their local and national limitations and linked them on a world scale; but its *unreason* separates them once more, according to a hidden logic reflected in crazy ideas and grotesque values. Having become estranged from its world, humanity is completely surrounded by what is alien to it. The barbarians are no longer at the ends of the earth: they are right here—*barbarized*, in fact, by this very same forced participation in hierarchical consumption. The humanism cloaking all this is

opposed to humanity, the negation of human activity and desires; it is the humanism of commodities, the benevolence of the parasitic commodity towards its host. For those who reduce human beings to objects, objects seem to acquire human qualities, and manifestations of real human activity appear as animal unconsciousness: for William Parker, Chief Humanist of Los Angeles, the Watts rock-throwers were behaving 'like monkeys in a zoo'.

When the California authorities announced that a 'state of insurrection' existed, the insurance companies recalled that they did not cover risks at that level. Indeed, nothing is insured beyond bare *survival*. By and large, American blacks may be certain that—if they keep quiet, at least—their survival is underwritten. Capitalism has become sufficiently centralized and entrenched in the state to distribute 'welfare' to the poorest. Precisely because they lag behind as socially organized survival



'All this World is like a Valley called Jarama'
(Song of the Lincoln Brigade)

The people's militias have collapsed in the face of the tanks and machine-guns in the northern districts of Santo Domingo. After four days and four nights of violent and bloody combat, General Imbert's troops at last succeeded in advancing to within a short distance of Duarte Avenue and the Villa Consuelo market. At six in the morning of Wednesday, the Radio Santo Domingo headquarters was besieged. This building, where the television studios are also located, is two hundred metres north of Francia Avenue and the corridor controlled by the 'Marines'. It had been bombarded the Thursday before by General Wessin y Wessin's Dominican Air Force fighters. . . . Sporadic fighting continued throughout Wednesday in the north-western part of the city but the popular resistance has now suffered its first defeat. . . . The civilians fought almost alone, for few of the members of the military who had joined Colonel Camano were to be found north of the corridor. The militias in the sector are largely led by workers belonging to the Dominican Popular Movement, a left-wing organization. Their sacrifice has won five days, which may turn out to be of great value to the 24 April uprising. . . .

In the Lower City, heaped-up oil drums served as a rather feeble excuse for barricades, and overturned delivery vans were used for cover. Weapons were ill-assorted. Costumes likewise. There were civilians in round low helmets and soldiers in forage caps. . . . Revolvers bulged in the blue-jean pockets of office workers and students. All the women intending to fight wore pants. . . . Sixteen-year-old boys clutched their rifles desperately to their chests like gifts they had been waiting for since the beginning of the world. Radio Santo Domingo made incessant appeals to the people, urging a massive movement to this location or that in the city where it is feared Wessin is about to attack. . . . It was at the entrance to the Duarte Bridge, at the crossroads with Lieutenant Amado García Avenue, that the crowd massed, Molotov cocktails at the ready. When Wessin's fighters appeared, flying at the lowest possible altitude along the bridge, thousands of fists rose furiously in their direction. The rat-tat-tat of their guns left dozens of crumpled bodies in its wake. The crowd fled back towards the houses, only to return after every strafing. Each attack elicited the same explosion of impotent rage—and a fresh muster of corpses. Yet it seemed as though the entire population would have to be killed before the Duarte Bridge could be cleared of humanity. On Monday the 26 April, Ambassador Tapley Bennet, Jr., returned from Florida. That evening the assault ship USS *Boxer* reached Santo Domingo with fifteen hundred Marines on board.

Marcel Niedergang, *Le Monde*, 21 May and 5 June 1965

expands, however, blacks present problems of *life*: what they demand is not to survive but to live. They have nothing of their own to insure; they might as well destroy all forms of private security and insurance known hitherto. They appear as what they really are: the irreconcilable enemies—not of the vast majority of Americans, but of the alienated way of life of modern society at large. The most advanced industrialized country merely shows us the path that will be followed everywhere unless the system is overthrown.

Some extreme black nationalists, to show why they could never accept anything less than a separate state, have argued that American society, even if it someday concedes general civic and economic equality, will never see its way clear to accepting interracial marriages. *It is therefore this American society which must disappear*, not only in America but everywhere in the world. The end of all racial prejudice (like the end of so many other prejudices related to inhibitions that restrain sex-

ual freedom) can only lie beyond 'marriage' itself: that is, beyond *the bourgeois family* (very tenuous among American blacks)—an arrangement that prevails in Russia just as in the United States as a model of hierarchical relationships and of the stability of *inherited power*, whether of wealth or of social/bureaucratic status. It is now often said that American youth, after 30 years of silence, is rising again as a force of opposition, and that the black revolt is its Spanish Civil War. If so, its 'Lincoln Brigades' need to understand the full significance of the struggle in which they are engaged, supporting it to the end in its universality. The 'excesses' of the blacks of Los Angeles are no more a political error than the armed resistance of the POUM in the Barcelona of May 1937 was a betrayal of the war against Franco. Any rebellion against the spectacle occurs at the level of the *totality*, because—even if it is confined to a single neighbourhood, such as Watts—it is a human protest against an inhuman life; because it begins

at the level of the *real single individual*, and because community, from which the individual in revolt is separated, is the *true social nature* of man, true human nature: the positive transcendence of the spectacle.

The Explosion Point of Ideology in China

'Le Point d'explosion de l'idéologie en Chine' was published as a pamphlet by the Situationist International in August 1967 and reprinted in *Internationale Situationniste* 11 (Paris, October 1967). The text may also be found in Guy Debord, *Oeuvres* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006, pp. 751–62). The translator acknowledges his debt to an earlier English version published in Ken Knabb, ed. and trans., *Situationist International Anthology* (Berkeley, CA: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981).

THE BREAK-UP of the International Association of Totalitarian Bureaucracies is now a fait accompli. To recall the terms used in the *Address to the Revolutionaries of Algeria and of All Countries* published by the Situationists in Algiers in July 1965, the irreversible crumbling of the 'revolutionary image' that the 'bureaucratic lie' holds up as the enemy of capitalist society as a whole, as that society's pseudo-negation and real support, is now plain to see, and this primarily on the very terrain where official capitalism has the greatest interest in sustaining the fiction of an adversary: the global confrontation between the bourgeoisie and the so-called socialist bloc. Despite all sorts of attempts to patch things up, it is now evident that *what was already not socialist is now no longer even a bloc*. The decay of the Stalinist monolith is now clearly signalled by the coexistence of 20 or so independent 'lines' ranging from Romania to Cuba and from Italy to the common programme of the

Vietnamese, Korean and Japanese parties. Russia, which proved incapable this year of convening a conference of all *European* Communist parties, would prefer to forget the time when Moscow reigned over the Comintern. Thus *Izvestia*, in September 1966, could blame the Chinese leaders for discrediting 'Marxist-Leninist' ideas in an 'unprecedented' way, and piously deplore a confrontational style which 'substitutes insults for the exchange of opinions and revolutionary experiences. Those who take this path confer absolute value on their own experience and display a dogmatic and sectarian approach to the interpretation of Marxist-Leninist theory. Such an attitude inevitably goes hand in hand with interference in the internal affairs of fraternal parties.' The Russian-Chinese debate, in which each of the two powers is led to impute every kind of anti-proletarian crime to its adversary (save that no mention may ever be made of one *real* crime, namely the class power of the

bureaucracy) is thus bound to end for both parties with the disabused realization that what was never anything but an inexplicable revolutionary mirage must be identical, in the absence of any other reality, to the status quo ante. The nakedness of this return to square one was perfectly exposed in February [1967] in New Delhi, when the Chinese Embassy described Brezhnev and Kosygin as 'new czars of the Kremlin' while the Indian government, which was allied with this new Muscovy, concluded at the same moment that 'the present masters of China have donned the imperial mantle of the Manchus'. This censure of the new dynasty of the Middle Kingdom was further refined the following month in Moscow, when the modernist state poet Andrei Voznesensky 'got a scent of Kuchum and his hordes' and felt that only 'eternal Russia' could be counted on to raise a bulwark against the Mongols threatening to pitch their tents 'amid the Egyptian treasures of the

Louvre'. The accelerating disintegration of bureaucratic ideology, which is just as apparent in the countries where Stalinism has seized power as in those others where any chance of its coming to power has evaporated, was bound to begin with the question of internationalism, but this was just the *beginning* of a general, irreversible collapse. Internationalism could never be embraced by the bureaucracy save as a deceptive slogan serving its real interests, as one *ideological* self-justification among others, for bureaucratic society is, precisely, proletarian community *turned on its head*. The bureaucracy is in essence a form of power founded on the possession of a national state, and it must ultimately bow to the logic of that reality in accordance with the particular interests imposed by the stage of development of the country that it controls. Its heroic period passed with the halcyon days of the ideology of 'socialism in one country', which Stalin took such good care to uphold as he proceeded to destroy revolutions in China (1927)

or Spain (1937). The later independent bureaucratic revolution in China, like that in Yugoslavia a little earlier, administered a dissolving agent to the bureaucratic world that would break the monolith apart in less than 20 years. The broad degeneration of bureaucratic ideology is now approaching its limit in the very country where, on account of overall economic backwardness, the remnants of ideological pretension to revolution must be boosted to the maximum: the very country, in short, where ideology is most needed, namely China.

The crisis that has been steadily widening in China since the spring of 1966 is without precedent in bureaucratic societies. Certainly, the ruling class of bureaucratic state capitalist systems in Russia or Eastern Europe, which in the normal way uses terror to cow the exploited majority, has often found itself torn apart internally by clashes and vendettas sparked by the objective difficulties that it encounters, or else by the subjectively

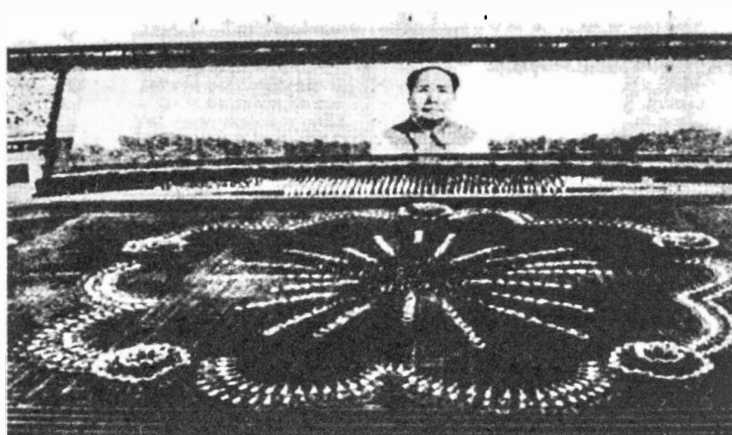
delusional style that a totally mendacious power is forced to adopt. But hitherto the bureaucracy (whose mode of appropriation of the economy requires centralization, since the hierarchical authority for any participation in its collective extraction of social surplus-value flows from itself alone) has always purged its ranks *from the top*. The pinnacle of the bureaucracy must remain stable, because the entire legitimacy of the system resides therein. Strife at the top must be kept at the top—a principle faithfully applied from the time of Lenin and Trotsky: although eminent individuals can be killed or replaced, high functions themselves must retain their impregnable majesty. Arbitrary and unanswerable repression may then work its way down in the usual way through level after level of the apparatus, as the simple and automatic corollary of what has been decided at the summit. For instance, Beria must first be killed, then judged, after which his tendency can be

hounded—indeed, anyone at all may be hunted down, for authority invested with the power of life and death defines ‘tendency’ in whatever way it pleases, and in so doing reaffirms itself as authority. All this is precisely what has *not* happened in China, where the continued survival of the declared antagonists, despite the fantastic upward spiralling of stakes in the struggle for absolute power, clearly indicates that *the ruling class has split in two*.

A social occurrence of such magnitude can obviously not be explained, in the anecdotal fashion of bourgeois commentators, in terms of differences over foreign policy; it is glaringly obvious, for instance, that the Chinese bureaucracy is quite happy to ignore the insult represented by the crushing of Vietnam at its very doorstep. Nor could mere personal rivalries concerning the handing over of the reins of power have thrown so much in the balance. When certain leaders are

denounced for having 'kept Mao Zedong away from power' since the end of the 1950s, everything suggests one of those charges so often invented after the fact during bureaucratic purges, like the claim that Trotsky contrived the civil war on orders from the Mikado, or that Zinoviev backed Lenin to please the British Empire and so on. Anyone who had really evicted a person as powerful as Mao from his leadership position would never have slept a wink so long as Mao might make a comeback. Mao would perforce have been done away with on the first day, thus allowing his successors, with the greatest of ease, to attribute his demise to (say) Khrushchev. The leaders and pamphleteers of the other bureaucratic states undoubtedly understand the Chinese crisis far better than their capitalist counterparts in the West, but their utterances are no more reliable for that because they must be afraid that in speaking of China they run the risk of revealing

too much about themselves. In the end, it is the remnants of Leftism in Western countries—ever ready to be duped by propaganda with the slightest whiff of sub-Leninism—who are likely to err more egregiously than anyone: they are much given to solemnly assessing the part played in Chinese society by the vestiges of rent allowed to capitalists loyal to the regime, or to searching for some leader or another in the general *mêlée* who might represent a Leftist tendency or promote workers' autonomy. The most obtuse accept the notion that there really was something 'cultural' about the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution—or at least they did so until January [1967], when the Maoist press played a dirty trick on them by admitting that 'from the outset it was a power struggle'. In point of fact, the only question worth debating seriously is why and how the ruling class could have broken into two opposing camps. All inquiry along these lines is, of course, impossible



Portrait of Alienation

PORTRAIT OF ALIENATION

This Chinese crowd, 'woven' into a portrait of Mao, may be considered a limiting case of spectacular state power in its *concentrated* form (see *Internationale Situationniste* 10, pp. 45 and 46): the form which, 'in underdeveloped areas . . . distils everything *admirable* . . . that one is supposed to applaud and passively consume into the ideological realm and, in extreme instances, into a single man'. Here the fusion of the spectator and the contemplated image would seem to have achieved perfection in policing. Because the Chinese bureaucracy some time later chose to go beyond even this degree of spectacular concentration, it ended up by exploding the machine.

for those who do not accept that the bureaucracy is a ruling class or who, alternatively, ignore that class' specificity and explain it in terms of the classical bourgeois system.

With respect to the *why* of the split within the bureaucracy, all that may be said with certainty is that the division was occasioned by an issue that jeopardized the very dominance of the ruling class, for, to resolve it, neither side in its unshakeable obstinacy shrank from immediately putting the entire basis of their shared class power at risk and imperilling all the established prerequisites of their management of society. The ruling class must, therefore, have known that it could not go on governing as before. We can be sure that the present conflict concerns the management of the *economy*; and that the collapse of the bureaucracy's successive economic policies is what has made this conflict so critical. The failure of the so-called Great Leap Forward (chiefly due to resistance

from the peasantry) not only put paid to the prospect of an ultra-voluntaristic surge in industrial production but also, disastrously, created a chaos that lasted for several years. Agricultural production itself seems to have increased very little since 1958, and population growth continues to outpace the staple-food supply. It is less easy to tell exactly which economic issues have divided the ruling class. In all likelihood, one side, made up of much of the party apparatus, union leaders and economists, wanted to maintain or increase to a greater or lesser degree the production of consumer goods, and to use economic incentives to encourage labour to greater efforts; besides making a number of concessions to peasants and especially to industrial workers, this policy implied an increase in hierarchically differentiated consumption levels across a broad swath of the bureaucracy. The other camp, comprising Mao and a majority of high-ranking military leaders, doubt-

less favoured the resumption at all costs of efforts to industrialize the country and an ever-more-extreme reliance on *ideological pressure* and terror, unconstrained exploitation of the workers, and possibly a call for 'egalitarian' consumer belt-tightening for a significant segment of lower-echelon functionaries. Both positions are designed to maintain the absolute sway of the bureaucracy and both recognize the necessity for barricades to be erected against class struggles that threaten to upset that dominance. In any case, the urgent and essential nature of this choice was so obvious to all that both sides felt it necessary, by reason of the disorder created by this division, to risk immediately compromising the very conditions of their existence. It may very well be that the fierce determination of both sides is justified in the sense that the problems of the Chinese bureaucracy are, in fact, insurmountable and, that while the two contending strategies were thus equally inapplicable, it was still necessary to choose between them.

In order to understand just *how* a split at the top of the bureaucracy could travel downwards, rallying cry by rallying cry, creating remote-controlled confrontations at every level of the party and state apparatus, and eventually among the masses, it should be borne in mind that remnants still exist of the old Chinese administrative system based on quasi-autonomous provinces. The denunciation this January by the Beijing Maoists of 'independent fiefdoms' clearly refers to this reality, and the growing disturbances over the last few months confirms it. It is likely that the phenomenon of regional bureaucratic autonomy, which manifested itself only weakly and sporadically during the counterrevolution in Russia, notably in connection with the Party organization in Leningrad, was able to establish many solid bases in bureaucratic China, thus facilitating the coexistence within the central government of clans and interest groups that were, in effect, the direct bureaucratic owners of entire regions and struck

bargains with one another on that basis. The bureaucratic power structure in China did not emerge from a workers' movement but, rather, from the militarization of the peasantry during a 22-year-long war. The army is still intertwined with the Party, all of whose leaders are former high-ranking officers, and the military is still the Party's favoured educational path upward for functionaries with peasant backgrounds. It seems, moreover, that the local administrations set up in 1949 relied very heavily on the zones through which the various army corps passed on their way south, leaving behind people in charge to whom they were closely bound by ties of shared regional origin (or indeed by family ties—a factor in the consolidation of bureaucratic cliques starkly revealed by the propaganda directed at Liu Shaoqi and others). Local bastions of semi-independent power within the bureaucratic system may thus have grown up in China, thanks, on the one hand, to the organizational structure of the conquering

army and, on the other, to the productive forces which that army was able to control in the subjugated regions.

When the Mao faction began its public attack on its well-entrenched adversaries by dragooning and manipulating students and schoolchildren, there was no immediate intention to embark on any kind of 'cultural' or 'civilizing' makeover of the mass of workers; the workers were already tightly confined by the straitjacket of the regime's ideology. Inane condemnations of Beethoven or Ming art, like all the invective against positions still held or reoccupied by a Chinese bourgeoisie that has obviously been destroyed as such, were mere diversions though it was no doubt felt that this kind of crude Leftism might always get a positive response from the oppressed masses (who do, after all, have some reason to feel that they are still faced by a few obstacles to the swift advent of a classless society!). The chief purpose of the

operation, however, was to have the *regime's ideology*, Maoist by definition, emerge onto the street in support of the Mao tendency. The Maoists' adversaries, since they themselves could not claim to be anything other than Maoists, were discomfited by the initiation of this entirely vacuous dispute. Their inadequate 'self-criticisms' tended to reflect only their determination to hang on to their positions. The first phase in this tussle may thus be described as a clash between the *official masters of ideology* on the one hand and the majority of the *masters of the State and the economic apparatus* on the other. In order to maintain its collective grip on society, however, the bureaucracy as a whole needs to control both ideology and the administrative and repressive apparatus, so that allowing a rift of this kind to develop was a risky venture, especially if it could not be quickly closed. We know that most of the apparatus—and Liu Shaoqi himself, despite the shakiness of his position in

Beijing—put up an obstinate resistance. First, an attempt was made to prevent the tide of Maoist agitation from spreading beyond the universities, where ‘work groups’ were set up as a counterforce, but this effort failed; the Maoists emerged onto the streets of all the larger cities and began to use wall posters and direct action to attack targeted officials everywhere—and, not infrequently, committing errors and acting with an excess of zeal. The officials in question organized resistance wherever they could. In the first clashes between workers and the Red Guard, however, the workers were most likely led by Party *activists* in the factories who were answerable to leaders prominent in the local power structure. Before long, though, the workers, exasperated by the Red Guard’s excesses, began to take things into their own hands. Whenever the Maoists spoke of ‘spreading the cultural revolution’, first to the factories and later to the countryside, they gave the false impression

that they were planning developments which, in reality, throughout the autumn of 1966, were completely beyond their control and which had, indeed, already occurred despite their best efforts. The drop in industrial production; the chaos in transportation, irrigation and throughout the state administration up to the ministerial level (the efforts of Zhou Enlai notwithstanding); the autumn and spring harvests jeopardized; a complete halt to education (particularly serious in an underdeveloped country) for more than a year—all these were the inevitable outcome of a struggle whose extension was solely due to the resistance put up by precisely that portion of the established bureaucracy which the Maoists were determined to vanquish.

The Maoists, whose political experience has had very little to do with urban struggles, have thus had a good opportunity to measure the pertinence of Machiavelli's words of warning in his

History of Florence: 'Let no one, when raising popular commotions, imagine he can afterward control them at his pleasure.' After some months of pseudo-cultural pseudo-revolution, authentic class struggle raised its head as the workers and peasants began to act for themselves. The workers could not fail to realize what the Maoist perspective implied for them; as for the peasants, who saw their patches of land threatened, they proceeded in several provinces to share out the fields and equipment of the 'people's communes' (the new ideological garb of the old administrative areas, often having the same boundaries as former cantons). Rail strikes were followed by a general strike in Shanghai (denounced, as in Budapest, as the favourite weapon of the capitalists); by strikes in the great industrial conglomeration of Wuhan, in Guangzhou, in Hubei, and among metal-workers and textile-workers of Chongqing; and by attacks mounted by peasants in Sichuan and Fujian.

These events came to a head in January, leaving China on the brink of chaos. During the same period, in the wake of the organizing of workers into 'Purple Guards' in Guangxi as early as September 1966 to combat the Red Guard, and anti-Maoist rioting in Nanjing, 'armies' were constituted in various provinces, such as the 'Army of 1 August' in Guangdong. The national army had to be sent to places throughout the country in February and March to subdue the workers, manage production through 'military control' of the factories and, with the help of militias, even oversee labour in the countryside. The workers' fight to maintain or increase their wages—the famous 'economistic' tendency condemned by the Beijing leadership—was sometimes accepted, even encouraged by local officials resisting rival Maoist apparatchiks. But there is no doubt that the struggle was led by an unstoppable tendency within the working-class base. This is very clearly demonstrated by the summary dissolution in March of the 'professional

associations' formed after the earlier abolition of the state unions, whose bureaucracy could not be subordinated to the Maoist line: in Shanghai that March, for instance, the *Jiefang Ribao* denounced 'the feudal tendency of these associations, which are formed not on a class basis [for 'class basis', read: the foundations of an absolute monopoly of Maoist power], but instead on the basis of individual trades, the aim of their activity being the furtherance of the partial and short-term interests of the workers of a particular trade'. This defence of the real owners of the general and permanent interests of the commonwealth had been perfectly summed up on 11 February in a directive from the Council of State and the Military Commission of the Central Committee: 'All elements who have purloined or stolen arms must be arrested.'

At a moment when the task of resolving this conflict (which has evidently led to tens of thousands of deaths and pitted large military units with all their equipment, even warships, against



one another) has fallen to the Chinese army, that army itself is divided. It is charged with ensuring the continuation and intensification of production even though it is no longer capable of guaranteeing the unity of national power; any direct intervention against the peasantry would moreover be fraught with danger, since the military is recruited for the most part from the countryside. That the Maoists should have sought a truce in March and April, declaring that all Party workers were re-

deemable except for a 'handful' of traitors, and that the main threat henceforward was 'anarchism', certainly reflected their concern about the difficulty of harnessing the energies unleashed among the youth by the Red Guard experience; but it also reflected their *fundamental* anxiety at having come to the very brink of the dissolution of the ruling class itself. The Party, along with the provincial and central administration of the country, was now at disintegration point. It was essential to 'restore labour discipline'. 'The principle of excluding and dismissing all Party workers,' said *The Red Flag* in March, 'must be totally rejected.' And here is *New China* as early as February: 'It is all very well to crush all the organizers, but once you have taken over the organization what do you have but an empty meeting room and some rubber stamps?' Thereafter, rehabilitations and compromises followed in quick and random succession. The actual survival of the bureaucracy was the

supreme cause that inevitably relegated its various political options to the level of mere means to that end.

It is fair to say that, as of the spring of 1967, the movement known as the 'cultural revolution' had turned into a disastrous failure—unquestionably the greatest failure in the long series of failures of bureaucratic power in China. Despite the extraordinary expense of the campaign, not one of its goals had been achieved. The bureaucracy was more divided than ever. Every new authority set up in the regions held by the Maoists would split in its turn. The 'triple revolutionary alliance' of the army, the Red Guard and the Party was gradually falling apart by reason both of the antagonisms between its three components (with the Party in particular standing aloof or entering merely in order to sabotage) and of the ever more acute antagonisms within each of these forces. Repairing the apparatus seemed as difficult as constructing another. Most important, *at least two-*

thirds of China was in no way under the control of the central government in Beijing.

In addition to the governmental committees of the followers of Liu Shaoqi and the movements of worker resistance, which continue to grow stronger, *warlords* have already re-emerged: in the uniform of independent 'Communist' generals, they deal directly with the central government and pursue their own policies, especially in frontier regions. General Zhang Guohua, master of Tibet, used armoured vehicles against the Maoists after street-fighting broke out in Lhasa. Three Maoist divisions were sent to 'crush the revisionists'. They seem to have met with limited success for, in April, General Zhang was still in control of the region. On 1 May, he was invited to Beijing, where negotiations produced a compromise under which he was made responsible for setting up a revolutionary committee to govern Sichuan where, by April, a 'revolutionary alliance' influenced by a certain General Hung had seized

power and thrown the Maoists in gaol; then, in June, members of a people's commune had taken up arms and attacked the army. In Inner Mongolia, on the orders of Liu Jiang, a deputy political commissar, the army declared its opposition to Mao as early as February. The same sort of thing happened in Hebei, Henan and Manchuria. In Gansu, in May, General Zhao Yongshe mounted a successful anti-Maoist putsch. Xinjiang, with its nuclear installations, was declared neutral by mutual agreement as early as March and placed under the authority of General Wang Enmao. Wang is nevertheless reported to have attacked 'Maoist revolutionaries' in June. In July, Hubei was in the hands of Chen Zaido, commander of the district of Wuhan, one of the oldest industrial centres in China. In the hallowed tradition of the Xian Incident of 1935, Chen had two prominent leaders from Beijing, sent to negotiate with him, placed under arrest; the prime minister was then

obliged to travel to Hubei and, when he succeeded in having his two emissaries freed, this was hailed as a 'victory'. Meanwhile, 2,400 factories and mines in Hubei province were paralysed following an armed uprising of 50,000 workers and peasants. By the beginning of summer, in fact, it was apparent that conflict was everywhere: in June, 'conservative workers' in Henan fire-bombed a textile mill; in July, workers in the coal mines of Fushun and the oil refineries of Daxing went on strike; Jiangxi miners declared open season on Maoists; a call was made for struggle against 'the industrial army of Zhejiang', described as 'an anti-Marxist terrorist organisation'; peasants threatened to march on Nanjing and Shanghai; there was fighting in the streets of Guangzhou and Chongqing and students in Guiyang attacked the army and took Maoist leaders prisoner. The government, having resolved to quell violence 'in the regions controlled by the central authorities',

obviously had its work cut out even there. Unable to stem the disturbances, it stemmed *news* of them by expelling most of the few foreign residents in the country.

By the beginning of August, however, the rift in the army had become so dangerous that the official Beijing papers themselves acknowledged that the followers of Liu Shaoqi want 'to set up an independent reactionary bourgeois fiefdom within the army' (*People's Daily*, 5 August 1967) and that 'attacks on the dictatorship of the proletariat in China have come not only from the upper levels but also from the lower ones'. Beijing has ended up frankly admitting that at least a third of the army has declared its opposition to the central government and that the government has lost control of a large portion of traditional China with its 18 provinces. The immediate consequences of the Wuhan incident seem to have been very serious: paratroopers from Beijing sup-



ported by six gunboats sent up the Yangze from Shanghai were repelled after a pitched battle; elsewhere, arms have reportedly been supplied by the arsenals of Wuhan to anti-Maoists in Chongqing. It is notable too that the Wuhan forces concerned belonged to the army group under the direct command of Lin Biao—the only such group considered reliable. Now, in mid-August, armed conflicts have become so widespread that the Maoist government has ended up officially discarding the continuation of policy by means that backfire against it; it now claims to

prefer persuasion, and vows to succeed in this by embracing 'the power of the pen'. Simultaneously, however, it has announced the distribution of arms to the masses in 'loyal zones'. But where are such zones to be found? Fighting has resumed in Shanghai, a city portrayed for months as a rare stronghold of Maoism. Soldiers in Shandong are inciting peasants to revolt. The leadership of the air force has been denounced as an enemy of the regime. And as the 47th Army moved to restore order in Guangzhou, that city, just as in the time of Sun Yat-sen, broke away and became a beacon of revolt, with the railway and urban-transit workers acting as the spearhead: political prisoners have been liberated, arms intended for Vietnam seized from freighters at the docks and an unknown number of individuals hanged in the street. China is thus slowly sinking into a confused civil war, at once a struggle involving various regions within a crumbling bureaucratic state power

structure and a struggle by workers and peasants against the exploitation that it behoves the bureaucratic power centres, as rent apart as they may be, to maintain everywhere.

Since the Maoists have proved themselves masters of absolute ideology (and notwithstanding the results thereof, noted above), an exorbitant amount of admiration and approbation has been heaped upon them by Western intellectuals, who never fail to salivate in response to stimuli of this sort. K. S. Karol, for example, writing in *Le Nouvel Observateur* for 15 February 1967, wagged a professorial finger at the Maoists for forgetting 'that real Stalinists are not potential allies of China but her most unrelenting enemies: the cultural revolution with its anti-bureaucratic tendencies reminds them of nothing so much as Trotskyism'. Nor has there been any shortage of actual Trotskyists happy to concur—thereby, one might say, getting their own measure exactly. *Le Monde*, the

most unashamedly Maoist newspaper outside China, has announced on a daily basis that Mao is on the point of successfully seizing a power that one might have supposed had belonged to him for the last 18 years. Academic China specialists, almost all of whom are Stalino-Catholics (a hybrid creature found everywhere, but especially in this milieu), have dredged up the notion of a Chinese soul to help legitimize the new Confucius. The ever-risible attitudes of mildly Stalinophile bourgeois intellectuals were brought to full flower by the Maoists' tallest tales. By their claim, for instance, that the 'cultural' revolution is bound to last for 1,000 or even for 10,000 years. Or that the Little Red Book has at last succeeded in 'making Marxism Chinese'. Or these pearls: 'The sound of men reciting quotations from Mao in strong clear tones is heard in every army unit'; 'Drought holds no fears for us; the thought of Mao Zedong is our fertilizing rain'; 'The head of state was adjudged

responsible . . . for not having foreseen the volte-face of Marshal Chiang Kai-shek when he unleashed his forces on the Communist forces': the reference is to the 1927 coup, which *everyone* in China foresaw perfectly, but had to suffer passively in compliance with Stalin's orders (*Le Monde*, 4 April 1967); a Maoist choir singing a hymn entitled 'A Hundred Million People Take Up Arms to Criticize the Sinister Book of Self-Perfection' (a once official but insignificant booklet by Liu Shaoqi). The list could be extended ad infinitum, but let us close it with a *bon mot* from the *People's Daily* for 31 July 1967: 'The present situation of the proletarian cultural revolution in China is excellent, but the class struggle is becoming more difficult.'

All the hot air notwithstanding, the historical lessons of this period are simple. Wherever China may be headed, the image of the last revolutionary-bureaucratic regime is now shattered. Internal

collapse has been added to repeated foreign-policy disasters, including the annihilation of Indonesian Stalinism, the break with Japanese Stalinism, the destruction of Vietnam by the United States and, last but not least, Beijing's declaration this July that the Naxalbari 'insurrection' heralded Maoist peasant revolution throughout India—just days before the movement was put down by the very first intervention by the police: by clinging to their fantastical view, the Chinese Communists have lost the greater part of their Indian support—that is to say, the last great bureaucratic party whose loyalty they still retained. Meanwhile, the underlying cause of China's internal crisis is its failure to industrialize the country and make itself into a model for underdeveloped nations. Stretched to its absolute limit, ideology *disintegrates*: its supreme form is also its absolute zero: the night where all ideological cows are black. When bureaucrats battle one another in total confusion, all invoking the same dogma and seeing 'bourgeois

hiding behind the red flag' everywhere, double-think has manifestly come unstuck. The joyous end of ideological lies, struck dead by ridicule, is at hand. It is not China, but our world at large that has generated the ridicule. We wrote in the August 1961 issue of *Internationale Situationniste* that this world was destined to become 'more and more painfully ridiculous on every level until its complete revolutionary reconstruction'. We now see that process playing out. The proletarian critique of the coming era will be conscious of having nothing of its own to protect or conserve, conscious that all its existing ideological props have been pulled away in an atmosphere of shame and fear. By thus discovering that it has been dispossessed of the false assets of a world of lies, that critique will recognize that it is the determinate negation of the whole of world society; it will realize as much, too, in China. At present it is the *worldwide* decomposition of the bureaucratic International that is making itself felt in that country, as central

authority crumbles into independent provinces. In this way, China is rediscovering its past, which presents it with the real unfulfilled revolutionary tasks of a movement defeated years ago: the present moment, when, so we are told, 'Mao is recommencing in 1967 what he started in 1927' (*Le Monde*, 17 February) is in fact the moment when the masses of workers and peasants have surged across the whole country for the first time since 1927. As difficult as it may be for consciousness to develop and for autonomous objectives to be realized, the fact is that something in the total domination suffered until now by the Chinese workers has disappeared. The proletarian 'mandate from heaven' is now a dead letter.

[Post Scriptum, October 1967:] The above text, first issued as a pamphlet on 16 August 1967, is reprinted here [in *Internationale Situationniste* 11] unmodified. The most recent news from China has merely confirmed the seriousness of the current turmoil.

A Sick Planet

Written by Guy Debord in 1971, this text was intended for publication in *Internationale Situationniste* 13, which never appeared. It was first published in the French edition of the present collection in 2004. It may also be found in Guy Debord, *Oeuvres* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006, pp. 1063–9).

‘POLLUTION’ IS IN FASHION TODAY, exactly in the same way as revolution: it dominates the whole life of society, and it is represented in illusory form in the spectacle. It is the subject of mind-numbing chatter in a plethora of erroneous and mystifying writing and speech, yet it really does have everyone by the throat. It is on display everywhere as ideology, yet it is continually gaining ground as a material development. Two antagonistic tendencies, progression towards the highest form of commodity production and the project of its total negation, equally rich in contradictions within themselves, grow ever stronger in parallel with one other. Here are the two sides whereby a sole historical moment, long awaited and often described in advance in partial and inadequate terms, is made manifest: the moment when it becomes impossible for capitalism to carry on working.

A time that possesses all the technical means necessary for the complete transformation of the

conditions of life on earth is also a time—thanks to that same separate technical and scientific development—with the ability to ascertain and predict, with mathematical certainty, just where (and by what date) the automatic growth of the alienated productive forces of class society is taking us: to measure, in other words, the rapid degradation of the very conditions of survival, in both the most general and the most trivial senses of that term.

Backward-looking gas-bags continue to waffle about (against) the *aesthetic* criticism of all this, fancying themselves clear-eyed and modern and in tune with their times when they argue that motorways, or the public housing of a place like Sarcelles, have their own beauty—a beauty preferable after all to the discomforts of ‘picturesque’ old neighbourhoods. These ‘realists’ solemnly observe that the population as a whole, *pace* those nostalgic for ‘real’ cooking, now eat far better than formerly. What they fail to grasp is that the problem

of the degeneration of the totality of the natural and human environment has *already* ceased to present itself in terms of a loss of quality, be it aesthetic or of any other kind; the problem has now become the more fundamental one of whether a world that pursues such a course can preserve its *material existence*. In point of fact, the impossibility of its doing so is perfectly demonstrated by the entirety of detached scientific knowledge, which no longer debates anything in this connexion except for the length of time still left and the palliative measures that might conceivably, if vigorously applied, stave off disaster for a moment or two. This science can do no more than walk hand in hand with the world that has produced it—and that *holds it fast*—down the path of destruction; yet it is obliged to do so with eyes open. It thus epitomizes—almost to the point of caricature—the uselessness of knowledge in its unapplied form.

Admirably accurate measurements and projections are continually being made concerning the rapid increase in the chemical pollution of the breathable atmosphere, as of rivers, streams and, already, oceans; the irreversible accumulation of radioactive waste attending the development of nuclear power for so-called peaceful purposes; the effects of noise; the pervasion of space by plastic junk that threatens to turn it into an everlasting refuse dump; birth rates wildly out of control; the demented vitiation of foodstuffs; the urban sprawl everywhere overrunning what was once town and countryside; and, likewise, the spread of mental illness—including the neurotic fears and hallucinations that are bound to proliferate in response to pollution itself, the alarming features of which are placarded everywhere—and of suicide, whose rate of increase precisely parallels the accelerating construction of this environment (not to mention the effects of nuclear or bacteriological warfare,

the wherewithal for which is already to hand, hanging over us like the sword of Damocles, even though it is, of course, avoidable).

In short, if the scope and even the reality of the 'terrors of the year 1000' are still a subject of controversy among historians, terror of the year 2000 is as patent as it is well founded; indeed, it is now based on *scientific certainty*. At the same time, what is happening is by no means fundamentally new: rather, it is simply the *ineluctable outcome* of a longstanding process. A society that is ever more sick, but ever more powerful, has recreated the world—everywhere and in concrete form—as the environment and backdrop of its sickness: it has created a *sick planet*. A society that has not yet achieved homogeneity, and that is not yet self-determined, but instead *ever more* determined by a part of itself positioned above itself, external to itself, has set in train a process of domination of Nature that has not yet established domination

over itself. Capitalism has at last demonstrated, by virtue of its own dynamics, that *it can no longer develop the forces of production*—and this, not in a *quantitative* sense, as many have taken it, but rather in a *qualitative* one.

For bourgeois thought, however, speaking methodologically, only the quantitative is valid, measurable and efficient, whereas the qualitative is no more than vague subjective or artistic decoration of the really true, which is gauged solely by its actual *avoir-dupois*. For dialectical thought, by contrast, and hence for history and for the proletariat, the qualitative is the most decisive dimension of real progress. That is what capitalism, on the one hand, and we, on the other, will eventually have demonstrated.

The masters of society are now obliged to speak of pollution, both in order to combat it (for after all they live on the same planet as we do—which is the only sense in which it may be said that

the development of capitalism has in effect brought about a measure of class fusion) and in order to conceal it, for the plain fact that such harmful and dangerous trends exist constitutes an immense motive for revolt, a *material* requirement of the exploited just as vital as the struggle of nineteenth-century proletarians for the right to eat. Following the fundamental failure of the reformisms of the past—all of which without exception aspired to the definitive solution of the problem of class—a new kind of reformism is heaving into view which answers to the same needs as the earlier varieties, namely the oiling of the machine and the opening up of new profitable areas to cutting-edge enterprises. The most modern sector of industry is racing to get involved with the various palliatives to pollution, seeing these as so many new opportunities made all the more attractive by the fact that a good part of the capital monopolized by the state is available for invest-

ment and manipulation in this sphere. While this new reformism is guaranteed to fail for exactly the same reasons as its predecessors, it differs radically from them in that *it has run out of time*.

The growth of production has until now entirely confirmed its nature as the realization of *political economy*: as the growth of poverty, which has invaded and laid waste the very fabric of life. A society where the producers kill themselves working, and can do nothing but *contemplate* the product of their labour, now allows them in all transparency to see—and breathe—the *general* result of alienated labour, which has proven equally lethal. This society is ruled by an overdeveloped economy which turns everything—even spring water and city air—into *economic goods*, which is to say that everything has become *economic ill*—that ‘complete denial of man’ which has now reached its perfect *material conclusion*. The conflict in capitalism between modern productive forces and the

relations of production, whether bourgeois or bureaucratic, has entered its final stage. The rate of production of non-life has risen continually on its linear and cumulative course; a final threshold having just been passed in this progression, what is now produced, directly, is *death*.

Throughout a world where employers wield all the power thanks to the institution of labour as a commodity, the ultimate, acknowledged and essential function of the developed economy of today is the *production of employment*. A far cry indeed from the 'progressive' nineteenth-century expectation that science and technology would reduce human labour by increasing productivity, and thus more easily satisfy the *needs heretofore deemed real by all*, without any *fundamental change* in the quality of the goods made available to that end. It is for the sake of 'creating jobs' (even in country areas now devoid of peasants), that is to say for the sake of using human labour as alienated

labour, as wage-labour, that *everything else is done*; and hence that, stupidly, the very foundations of the life of the species—at present even more fragile than the thinking of a Kennedy or a Brezhnev—are put at risk.

The old ocean itself cares naught for pollution, but history is by no means indifferent to it. History can be saved only by the abolition of labour as a commodity. And historical consciousness has never been in such great and urgent need of mastering its world, for the enemy at its gates is no longer illusion but its own death.

When the pitiful masters of a society whose wretched destiny is now discernible—a fate far worse, be it said, than those evoked in the fulminations of even the most radical Utopians of an earlier time—are obliged to admit that our environment has become a social issue, and that the management of *everything* has become directly *political*, right down to the herb of the fields and

the possibility of drinking water, sleeping without pills or washing without developing sores—in such circumstances, it is obvious that the old specialized politics must perforce declare itself utterly bankrupt.

Bankrupt, indeed, in the supreme expression of its voluntarism, namely the totalitarian bureaucratic power of the so-called socialist regimes, where the bureaucrats in power have proved incapable of managing even the previous stage of the capitalist economy. If these regimes pollute much less (the United States alone produces 50 per cent of worldwide pollution), it is simply because they are much poorer. A country such as China, if it is to retain respect as a power among impoverished nations, has no choice but to sacrifice a disproportionate part of its slim budget to the generation of a decent quantity of pollution, as for example, to the (re)discovery or touching-up of the technology of thermonuclear war (or,

more precisely, of the terrifying *spectacle* of thermonuclear war). Such a high quotient of poverty, both material and mental, buttressed by so much terror, amounts to a death warrant for the bureaucracies presently in power. What dooms the most modern forms of bourgeois power, by contrast, is a surfeit of wealth that is in effect *poisoned*. The supposedly democratic management of capitalism, in any country, offers nothing except the electoral victories and defeats that—as has always been obvious—have never changed anything in general and precious little in particular with respect to a class society which imagines that it can last forever. Nor do elections change anything more on those occasions when the system of management itself enters a crisis and affects to desire some vague kind of guidance in the resolution of secondary but urgent problems from an alienated and stupefied electorate (as in the United States, Italy, Great Britain or France). All the experts

have long noted—without bothering to explain the fact—that voters almost never change their ‘opinions’, the reason being that voters are people who for a brief instant assume an abstract role that is designed, precisely, to prevent them from existing in their own right and, hence, from changing. (This mechanism has been analysed countless times by demystified political science and by revolutionary psychoanalysis alike.) Nor are voters more likely to change because the world around them is changing ever more precipitately: qua voters, they would not change even if the world was coming to an end. Every representative system is essentially *conservative*, whereas the conditions of a capitalist society have never been susceptible of conservation. They are continually, and ever more rapidly, undergoing modification, but decisions in this regard—which always ultimately favour giving the market economy its head—are left entirely to politicians who are no more than

publicists, whether they run uncontested or against others who are going to do just the same thing—and say so loudly. And yet the person who has just voted ‘freely’ for the Gaullists or for the French Communist Party, just like someone who has been forced to vote for a Gomulka, is quite capable of showing who they really are a week later by taking part in a wildcat strike or an insurrection.

In its state-run and regulated form, the ‘fight against pollution’ is bound, at first, to mean no more than new specializations, ministries, jobs for the boys and promotions within the bureaucracy. The fight’s effectiveness will be perfectly consonant with that approach. It will never amount to a real will for change until the present system of production is transformed root and branch. It will never be vigorously carried on until all pertinent decisions, made democratically and in full knowledge of the issues by the producers, are permanently monitored and executed by *those producers themselves* (oil tankers will inevitably spill their

cargo into the ocean, for example, until they are brought under the authority of authentic *sailors' soviets*). Before the producers can rule and act on such questions, however, they must become adults: they must, all of them, seize power.

Nineteenth-century scientific optimism foundered over three main issues. The first was the claim that the advent of revolution was certain, and that it would ensure the happy resolution of existing conflicts; this was the left-Hegelian and Marxist illusion, the least acutely felt among the bourgeois intelligentsia, but the richest, and ultimately the least illusory. The second issue was a view of the universe, or even simply of matter, as harmonious. And the third was a euphorically linear conception of the development of the forces of production. Once we come to terms with the first issue we shall deal by extension with the third, thus enabling us, albeit much later, to address the second, to make it into that which is at stake for us. It is not the symptoms but the illness itself that

must be cured. Today, fear is everywhere and we shall escape it only through our own strength, our own ability to destroy every existing kind of alienation and every image of the power that has been wrested from us: only by submitting *everything—except ourselves*—to the sole power of workers' councils, possessing and continually reconstructing the totality of the world—by submitting everything, in other words, to an authentic rationality, a new legitimacy.

As for the 'natural' and the man-made environment, as for birth rates, biology, production, 'madness' and so on, the choice will not be between festival and unhappiness but, rather, consciously and at every turn in the road, between a myriad of possibilities on the one hand, happy or disastrous but relatively reversible, and nothingness on the other. The *terrible* choices of the near future, by contrast, amount to but one alternative: total democracy or total bureaucracy. Those with

misgivings about total democracy should try to test its possibility for themselves by *giving it a chance to prove itself in action*; otherwise, they might as well pick themselves a tombstone, for, as Joseph Déjacque put it, 'We have seen Authority at work, and its work condemns it utterly.'

The slogan 'Revolution or Death!' is no longer the lyrical expression of consciousness in revolt: rather, it is the *last word of the scientific thought of our century*. It applies to the perils facing the species as to the inability of individuals to belong. In a society where it is well known that the suicide rate is on the increase, the experts had to admit, reluctantly, that during May 1968 in France it fell to almost nil. That spring also vouchsafed us a clear sky, and it did so effortlessly, because few cars were burnt and the shortage of petrol prevented the others from polluting the air. When it rains, when there are clouds of smog over Paris, let us never forget that it is the government's fault.

Alienated industrial production makes the rain.

Revolution makes the sunshine.



'A society that is ever more sick, but ever more powerful,
has recreated the world everywhere and in concrete form as
the environment and backdrop of its sickness:
it has created a sick planet.'

ISBN 1905422687



9 781905 422685